

Sisters Who Travelled Afar

Sr. Mary Heffernan

In 1984, Sr. Mary Heffernan volunteered to go to Hafnarjurdur, Iceland, as an experienced nurse, mid-wife and radiographer. She remained there for eleven months. In 1986, she answered a call to share all her wonderful skills in famine-stricken Ethiopia. There, she developed Mother and Child Health Care Programmes, and she had 2 houses built near to where she resided, in which mothers lived for a time, learning Pre and Post Natal care. Ethiopia's needs gave scope to Mary's generous heart and skill. She held clinics in several outpost stations. She nursed the ill back to health and she became all things to all people in need, between 1986 and 2000. Sadly, Mary died suddenly in her native Ballina in 2002, upon retirement.

Sr. M. Aquinas McNulty

Sr. Aquinas turned her compassionate heart to people with Aids virus. She travelled to Boston where she worked for some time. In 1994, she volunteered her services for a short while in an orphanage in Romania. All her far-reaching work in Ballina and beyond, Sister Aquinas made one further adventurous journey. She joined the Diocesan Mission to Brazil and after much loving work, she became suddenly ill, and she died there on January 29th 1997. Sr. Aquinas is buried in Colinas Brazil, among the people she truly loved, and who loved her equally well.

Sr. M. Loreto Burns

During her last happy years in Ballycastle, Sr. Loreto found time to develop her talent, love and creativity, with art. Around that time she turned to making pottery and she even acquired a kiln, much to the delight of adults who were also similarly interested. When she was invited to leave all that behind and go to Achill, it was with some difficulty she went. However, an opportunity presented itself to answer a call to go to Kenya where Mercy Sisters from Sligo ministered. There, Loreto turned her attention to street children, and she very quickly introduced them to art-making. The children responded with great delight. They even sold their pictures in the local hotels. Together, they built up a little industry. This was augmented by money from Loreto's blood-sister, Canice, who was an accomplished artist, in Árd Bhríde Castlebar. The sale of her art helped Loreto's precious street children! The money was put to good use. They bought food and clothing, and they

grew in self-esteem. Loreto shared their successes with a rejoicing Mercy Community back home in Co Mayo.

Sr. Nollaig O'Horo

MY TIME IN MAZABUKA, ZAMBIA 2011-2016

“A beginning is ultimately an invitation to open towards the gifts and growth that are stored up for us...and take us to new levels and places and peoples”

The above words by John O'Donohue from his *Benedictus, A Book of Blessings* resonated with me as I started a new stage of my journey in Mercy on the 19th of September, 2011. What a glorious morning it was as I stepped off the plane in Lusaka at 6 am. I was accompanied by four other Mercy Sisters who had spent many fruitful years ministering in the Diocese of Monze which is located in the Southern Province of Zambia. We were welcomed by Sisters Celestine and Jacinta and, without much delay, we set out for Mazabuka which is a two-hour journey from Lusaka. Much to my surprise I noticed that the city of Lusaka is like many modern cities with one noticeable difference the majority of people were travelling by foot on their way to work as well as children on their way to school. I later discovered that these people mostly live in very poor compounds not visible from the main roads and bear no resemblance to the places I saw on that first morning.

As we left the city behind the rural area presented a different picture. The land was flat the soil parched as this was the hot dry season with no rainfall since March. Every now and then you could spot a village with low circular homes made from grass. An interesting stop was Banana junction and I marvelled at the women and children who try to eke out a living by selling their wares with no shade in a temperature of 35 Celsius. Finally, we reached Mazabuka and the next stop was Lulangilo (waiting in hope) my new home, a lovely house surrounded by a walled garden with fruit trees, vegetables and flowers. What a delight and what a change a little watering can do. Here I lived with Sisters Terry and Celestine, and their care of me enabled me to settle into life here for the next five years with ease and comfort.

To live in Mazabuka and its hinterland is to live alongside many people who struggle daily with poverty, hunger, poor housing, unemployment, lack of education, lack of health care, social injustice

and gender inequality. The Zambian people are a warm, creative and resourceful people. The sisters working here, 7 from the Northern Province, 1 from Kenya and I was the 8th, coming from the Western Province, not only brought comfort and compassion in the face of this poverty but also strove to enable the people to have a better quality of life.

Over my five years in Mazabuka what stands out for me was the magnitude of the ministries in which the Sisters were involved namely Education (early childhood, primary, special education, adult literacy, employment of teachers, monetary support for students to avail of post primary and university training, fees for families to secure their children's place in school), Health Care, Pastoral Care, Youth Ministry, Prayer Ministry, Parish Ministry, Food Programmes, Prison Ministry, Support to women to start a small business. The Sisters also employed people in their ministries and homes.

While I helped in some of the above ministries, my main ministry was in the special education area working with the pupils and supporting teachers of the learning-disabled child. In 1996 when the Sisters first came to Mazabuka they discovered that the learning disabled children were mainly hidden at home and received no education. Through the Mercy initiative and with the support of the Mazabuka Association for the Disabled, they secured classrooms in Mazabuka Basic School and so started the education of these children alongside the hearing-impaired children. When I arrived in 2011 the school was still in operation in Mazabuka Basic. There were 3 classrooms dark and dismal with 2/3 teachers in each room depending on numbers and with little outdoor facilities except for toilets. Over the years Sr. Andrea and her team had lobbied for a site to build a new school and finally got the go ahead in October 2011. What rejoicing there was on that day. Due to the Mercy influence in the area, local business people and farmers came on board. They dug a bore hole for water, installed electricity and built a boundary wall to secure the site. On June 17th 2013 the new school was opened comprising of 2 classroom blocks, an administration block, a skills unit, a large hall with its own kitchen, toilets and showers, a large playground and vegetable garden. It was named *The Flamboyant School for Special Children* and it has truly enhanced the life, teaching and learning of all involved. Much effort was made to ensure the bright colourful classrooms were well equipped with learning and teaching materials, affording the pupils the opportunity to work at their own pace. Each day the pupils, seated comfortably in the large hall, received a nutritious hot meal.

The pupils delight and amazement at their new environment was evident They grew in confidence and enjoyed their new school with all the opportunities available to them.

The newly appointed head teacher was very effective and passionate about his role. I worked closely with him to promote good teaching methods, small group and personal learning and ways of enhancing the classroom environment now that the teachers had the space and equipment to do so. I also supported individual teachers when help was needed. Most of my time was spent with the pupils in small groups where I could offer individual help to each child. It was wonderful to see the progress being made, yes slow but steady. I also prepared the end of year school concert encouraging each class to participate with their teachers. This grew more promising each year with music, dance, drama, drum and percussion band and school choir. Due to large playground the pupils now enjoyed outdoor play and participate in the annual sports day for special schools and received many rewards.

The Skills Unit with its art and craft room, computer room and kitchen offer skills that are life giving and promote a wholesome and healthy life style. In the vegetable garden under the guidance the gardener the older pupils learn the art of organic gardening and produce a wonderful variety of vegetables which are sold locally.

As Zambia had no standardised testing programme for these children in consultation with the head teacher I organised in service for the staff in how to assess each pupil and establish a personal profile that would enable each one to work to their potential. Teachers of the youngest children availed of a three-day workshop on basic skills and classroom management. This was followed up by monthly reports from the teachers on progress being made. Two young teachers from Ireland volunteered a month of their time to establish learning through games as well as providing the necessary equipment. All of these programmes brought great life and joy to both teachers and pupils. Mercy also provided training for teachers in child protection.

The Mercy support to this school has been outstanding. Apart from teachers' salaries, no support is given by the Zambian Government. There is a constant effort to raise funds and this project has brought together many people of different creeds, race and colour all working together for the most needy and vulnerable. I wish to acknowledge the generous contribution made by the Mercy Sisters

Western Province, as well as donations made by friends of Mercy from the Ballina area and the Parish of Skreen.

The Flamboyant School is the only school of its kind in the town of Mazabuka and with its teachers can be seen as a pioneer in this field. It has helped to negate the stigma attached to the special child and parents are now open to having their special child educated. I feel privileged to have been involved with the pupils, teachers and parents of this very special school and honoured to have been given the opportunity to be part of this Mercy apostolate in Mazabuka

Sr. Margaret McHale

Mission with the South African Province 1995 – 1997

This was funded by Agency for Personal Services Overseas (APSO)

Margaret lived in the communities in Iona Convent in Pretoria and Mercy Centre in Winterveldt.

Ministry

Teenage Counselling.

- Iona Convent School in Pretoria.
- Tsogo High School in Mmakau.

Community Work

- Visitation to families.
- Input to adult programme for health workers in Winterveldt Health Centre.
- Volunteered as a Counsellor after completing relevant training with; –
- “LifeLine” Pretoria – a free community crisis intervention service.
- The Aids Centre, Pretoria, for people living with Aids and their families.

Sr. Maureen Kelly

“Go out to the whole world and preach the Good News”, from the final words of Jesus in St. Matthew’s gospel (Mt. 28: 20)

From various parts of the world – Ireland, Newfoundland, the United States of America, England, Australia and New Zealand, Sisters of Mercy accompany or have accompanied many Peruvian communities from the shores of Lake Titicaca in the Southern Andes, to Chulucanas in the extreme North. Ministries vary from workshops for women, formation programmes on human rights, trafficking of persons, care of the earth; prison ministry, a drug addiction centre, teaching in state secondary schools, work with emigrants, with children, prayer ministry etc. Whatever our ministry may be, our desire is to be a merciful presence wherever we are, recalling the words of Catherine McAuley, “things the poor prize more than gold, (are) the kind word, the gentle, compassionate look and the patient hearing of sorrows”.

Little did I think during the first half century of my life that I would one day work “on the missions”. However, after a period of discerning conversations with Sisters in Leadership of the Western Province of my Congregation, the Sisters of Mercy, I arrived at Lima International Airport as a new day was dawning in December 2000. This was a couple of days after the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of South America, which is celebrated on December 12th. On that same date, 300 years after Our Lady’s apparition to Juan Diego in Mexico, Catherine McAuley founded our congregation. The coincidence was moving as I stepped into a wholly unknown world.

At my first Mass the following Sunday I was greeted by Ana, a neighbour and friend of my companion Sisters. Ana warmly welcomed me with smiles and gestures and words that I did not understand, as the adventure of learning Spanish was yet to come. Ana still symbolizes for me the appreciation of the Peruvian people for our presence among them and their constant care and concern for our welfare. They constantly express their gratitude to missionaries who come from so far, as they say, to be among them and share life with them. In truth, it is much more we who are enriched by sharing in the simplicity of their lives.

The generous participation of people of all ages in the life of the parish community amazed me. The collective response of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops to the Second Vatican Council, on

becoming aware that widespread poverty, was engulfing the whole of *Latinoamérica*, led to the Bishops' Conference en Medellín. This episcopal conference lit a fire of awareness that the growing poverty was a serious injustice and contrary to the gospel. The seeds of Liberation Theology were already being sown in Perú by Gustavo Gutierrez and friends. Father Gustavo is still active in his 93rd year.

Thus began a wave of formation and participation of lay people in the church, by which they were enabled to relate their faith with their lived experience and to take responsibility for the life of their communities. The fruits of those decades are evident in many dioceses today.

While regression towards the past dulled some flames in more recent decades, we still maintain hope.

In the parish where I live, because of its size and dense population, there are eight chapels apart from the parish church. Under the umbrella of the Parish Council, which meets once a month, the elected committee representative from each of the chapel communities reports on the month's activities at the parish council meeting thus keeping everyone informed. Each chapel has various groups of volunteers who are involved in their own specific area. These are too numerous to mention, but I cannot omit our devoted followers of Frank Duff, founder of the Legion of Mary.

Catechetical programmes take place at all levels. Teenagers work with children, young adults with teenagers, and young adults and adults work with adults. All these programmes use the "See, Judge, Act" approach to integrate faith and life. This approach involves looking at the concrete reality, reflecting on it in the light of the gospel and taking action accordingly. Parents of children who are preparing for the sacraments participate in a weekly meeting for their own adult faith formation over a period of two years, the duration of the catechetical programme for children.

However, life has changed dramatically since the corona virus pandemic struck us in March 2020. We have shed tears of grief for friends and pastoral agents, who have succumbed to COVID-19. Pastoral visits have been replaced by phone calls, as have been visits to the sick and the bereaved. Meetings were eventually replaced by screen images using WhatsApp or Zoom.

Hunger has become a heartbreaking issue. During the first quarantine, some families extended a stick with a white cloth through a window to indicate that they had no food. For a large majority of people, no work today means no food tomorrow. Caritas came to the rescue through the parishes. Other donations also arrived. People, following the safety protocols, rolled up their sleeves and delivered food to those in need. The co-ordinators of the chapels created lists of names of needy families, adding to an overall coordinated effort to take care of the poorest among us. The spirit of solidarity was astounding. By now (March 2021) “soup kitchens”, which are subsidized in part by the state, have mostly replaced delivery of food parcels. However, voluntary help continues. So does solidarity and that spirit of fraternity that Pope Francis calls us to in his latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*.

My Mercy community consists of eight Sisters, six of whom are Peruvian and all of whom are dedicated to a variety of ministries as mentioned above. My own participation has evolved over the years. I started by accompanying a small chapel community in catechesis, and the preparation of liturgy. At that stage I was still struggling with a new language.

Gradually I became involved with youth, promoting leadership skills and citizen awareness, and also guiding retreats for youth. I was later invited to guide adult retreats. This has led to my ongoing involvement in spiritual direction, which for me is a very privileged ministry. I am indebted to the Jesuits of Manresa Retreat Centre in Dublin for the training I received from them.

Right now, with COVID restrictions, all retreat work and spiritual direction is virtual. In this way I continue to accompany individuals, youth and adult groups, with an eye towards a new and unknown future. I feel very privileged and blessed to be where I am.

Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, (paragraph 8) has written that he desires a fraternity that will “show us how to dream and turn our life into a wonderful adventure”.

So, let's all dream together!